Amendments to the claims:

1. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network ("NTN") that provides transit traffic amongst public and private wireline and wireless carrier networks servicing a metropolitan area, comprising:

at least one switch for cross-connecting each of a plurality of inputs to at least one of a plurality of outputs;

a plurality of tandem access points for connection to a plurality of said public and private wireline and wireless carrier networks servicing said metropolitan area; and

a network connecting said tandem access points to said at least one switch.

2. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 1,wherein at least one of said tandem access points terminates incoming calls to an incumbent LEC tandem or central office.

3. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 1, further comprising a plurality of tandem trunk group access points connected to said network for connection to a plurality of trunk groups servicing said metropolitan area.

4. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 3, wherein at least one of said tandem trunk group access points terminates incoming calls to at least one of emergency 911 services, directory assistance services, and operator services tandems.

5. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 1, wherein said at least one switch

comprises a plurality of switches connected to said network so as to provide distributed switching of data amongst said plurality of tandem access points.

6. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 1, wherein said at least one switch comprises a soft switch.

7. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 6, wherein said network transmits data between said tandem access points and said soft switch as data packets.

8. (Original) A Neutral Tandem Network as in claim 1, wherein said network comprises fiber transport cables and a plurality of fiber terminals interconnecting said at least one switch and said plurality of tandem access points.

9. (Original) A method of providing transit traffic amongst a plurality of public and private wireline and wireless carrier networks servicing a metropolitan area, comprising the steps of:

creating a distributed switching network at a higher level in a switching hierarchy including Regional Bell Operating Company (RBOC) tandems and that is independent of said plurality of public and private wireline and wireless carrier networks, said distributed switching network comprising at least one switch, a plurality of tandem access points, and a network connecting said tandem access points to said at least one switch;

connecting each carrier network of said plurality of public and private wireline and wireless carrier networks to at least one of said tandem access points; and

switching data amongst the carrier networks connected to said distributed switching network using said at least one switch.

10. (Original) A method as in claim 9, comprising the further steps of connecting a RBOC switching network to said distributed switching network and terminating traffic to said RBOC switching network.

11. (Original) A method as in claim 9, comprising the further steps of providing a plurality of tandem trunk group access points on said distributed switching network and connecting each tandem trunk group access point to a trunk group servicing said metropolitan area, said trunk group including at least one of an emergency 911 services tandem, a directory assistance services tandem, and an operator services tandem.

12. (Original) A method as in claim 9, comprising the further step of maintaining said distributed switching network financially and physically independent of each carrier network.

13. (Original) A method as in claim 9, wherein said switching step comprises the step of transmitting data packets from a tandem access point to said at least one switch over said network.